

On the Sign [Daimonion] of Socrates

10 1 "Very well," said Theocritus; 'but what, my dear sir, do we call Socrates' sign?⁴⁵ An imposture? For my part, nothing reported of Pythagoras' skill in divination has struck me as so great or so divine; for exactly as Homer⁴⁶ has represented Athena as 'standing at' Odysseus' 'side in all his labours,' so Heaven seems to have attached to Socrates from his earliest years as his guide in life a vision of this kind, which alone "showed him the way, illuminating his path⁴⁷" in matters dark and inscrutable to human wisdom, through the frequent concordance of the sign with his own decisions, to which it lent a divine sanction. For further and greater instances you must ask Simmias and Socrates' other friends; but I was myself present (I had come to visit Euthyphron the soothsayer) when Socrates — you recall the incident, Simmias — happened to be making the ascent toward the Symbolon⁴⁸ and the house of Andocides,⁴⁹ putting some question to Euthyphron the while and sounding him out playfully. Suddenly he stopped short and fell silent, lost for a good time in thought; at last he turned back, taking the way through the street of the cabinetmakers, and called out to the friends who had already gone onward to return, saying that the sign had come to him. Most turned back with him, I with the rest, clinging close to Euthyphron; but certain young fellows went straight ahead, imagining that they would discredit Socrates' sign, and drew along Charillus⁵⁰ the flute-player, who had also come to Athens with me to visit Cebes. As they were walking along the street of the statuaries past the law-courts, they were met by a drove of swine, covered with mud and so numerous that they pressed against one another; and as there was nowhere to step aside, the swine ran into some and knocked them down, and befouled the rest. Charillus came home like the others, his legs and clothes covered with mud; so that we always mentioned Socrates' sign with laughter, at the same time marveling that Heaven never deserted or neglected him."

11 1 "You suppose, then, Theocritus," replied Galaxidorus, "that Socrates' sign had some peculiar and extraordinary power, and that he did not, upon verifying from experience some rule of ordinary divination, let it turn the scale in matters dark and beyond the reach of reason? For just as a single drachm does not by itself tip the beam, but when joined to a weight in equilibrium with another inclines the whole mass in the direction of its own pull, so too a sneeze or chance remark or any such omen cannot, being trivial and light, incline a weighty mind to action; but when it is joined to one of two opposing reasons, it solves the dilemma by destroying the balance, and thus allows a movement and propulsion to arise."⁵¹

"Just so, Galaxidorus," my father broke in. "I have it from one of the Megarian school, who had it from Terpsion, that Socrates' sign was a sneeze, his own and others'; thus, when another sneezed at his

right, whether behind or in front, he proceeded to act, but if at his left, desisted; while of his own sneezes the one that occurred when he was on the point of acting confirmed him in how he had set out to do, whereas the one occurring after he had already begun checked and prevented his movement. But what astonishes me is that, supposing he relied on sneezes, he did not speak to his friends of being prompted or deterred by these, but by a sign from Heaven; for here again, my dear friend, we have a form of hollow affectation and boasting, and not the sincerity and simplicity that made him to our feeling truly great and superior to the generality of men — to be upset at odd moments by such external matters as a voice or sneeze, and thus be diverted from his actions and abandon his decisions. Nay, Socrates' movements are observed to have had an indefectible force and intensity in all he did, which implies that they were launched forth from a correct and powerful judgement and foundation; for of his own free will to have remained poor throughout his life when he could have had money which the donors would have been delighted and thankful to see him accept, and not to have forsaken philosophy despite so many obstacles, and in the end, although his followers had spared no efforts to save his life and had contrived a perfectly feasible means of escape, neither to have yielded to their entreaties nor to have flinched at the approach of death, but to have faced its terrors with reasoning unshaken, are not acts of a man whose views are at the mercy of voices or sneezes, but of one guided by a higher authority and principle to noble conduct.

"I also hear that he foretold to some of his friends the loss of the Athenian forces in Sicily.⁵² And still earlier, when Ppyrilampes,⁵³ the son of Antiphon, who had been wounded with a javelin and was taken prisoner by us in the pursuit at Delion, was told by the commissioners that came from Athens to negotiate a truce that Socrates had reached the coast at Oropus⁵⁴ with Alcibiades and Laches⁵⁵ and come home safe, he often invoked the name of Socrates, and of those of certain friends and members of his company who had fled with him toward Mount Parnes and been killed by our cavalry, as they had (he said) disregarded Socrates' sign and taken a different way, not following where Socrates led, in their retreat from the battle.⁵⁶ Simmias too has heard of this I think."

"Many times," said Simmias, "and from many persons; for these events led to no little talk at Athens about Socrates' sign."

12 1 "Are we, then, Simmias," said Pheidolaüs, "to let Galaxidorus in sport reduce so mighty a work of divination to sneezes and chance remarks? Even the ignorant multitude rely on these in trivial matters and in playful moods, but when graver dangers and actions of greater moment confront them, the words of Euripides⁵⁷ come true: **"None talks such folly when the fray impends."**

"I am ready, Pheidolaüs," rejoined Galaxidorus, "to listen to what Simmias has to say about these matters, if he has himself heard Socrates talk of them, and to share your forbearance; but what you

and Polymnis have said is not hard to refute. For as in medicine a rapid pulse or a blister, trifling in itself, is a sign of something by no means trifling, and as for a skipper the cry of a marine bird or the passing of a wisp of yellow cloud betokens wind and a rising sea, so for a mind expert in divination a sneeze or random utterance, in itself no great matter, may yet be a sign of some great event;⁵⁸ for in no art is the prediction of great things from small, or of many things from few, neglected. No; if a man ignorant of the significance of writing, on seeing letters few in number and mean in appearance, should doubt that a literate person⁵⁹ could gather from them the story of great wars that happened to men in the past, of foundations of cities, and of acts and sufferings of kings, Band should then assert that what revealed and recounted all this to that student of history was something divine, you would, my friend, be moved to hearty laughter at the fellow's simplicity; so here too take heed lest it be simplicity in us, in our ignorance of the significance for the future of the various signs interpreted by the art of divination, to resent the notion that a man of intelligence can draw from them some statement about things hidden from view — and that too when it is the man himself who says that it is no sneeze or utterance that guides his acts, but something divine. For I shall now deal with you, Polymnis, who are astonished that Socrates, a man who by his freedom from humbug and affectation had more than any other made philosophy human, should have termed his token not a 'sneeze' or 'omen' but in high tragic style 'the sign from Heaven.'⁶⁰ I, on the contrary, should have been astonished if a master of dialectic and the use of words, like Socrates, had spoken of receiving intimations not from 'Heaven' but from the 'Sneeze': it is as if a man should say that the arrow wounded him, and not the archer with the arrow, or that the scales, and not the weigher with the scales, measured the weight. For the act does not belong to the instrument, but to the person to whom the instrument itself belongs, who uses it for the act; and the sign used by the power that signals is an instrument like any other. But, as I said, if Simmias should have anything to say, we must listen to him, as he is better informed."

13 1 "First," said Theocritus, "we must see who the persons are that are entering the room — but I see it is Epameinondas, who is apparently bringing the stranger to meet us."

We looked toward the door and saw Epameinondas in the lead, with Hismenodorus, Bacchylidas,⁶¹ and Melissus the fluteplayer among our friends in the plot, while the stranger came last, a man of no ignoble presence, but showing gentleness and kindness in his demeanour and in person magnificently attired. When the stranger had taken his place beside Simmias, my brother beside me, and the rest as they happened to find seats, and all had fallen silent, Simmias called out to my brother: "Well, Epameinondas, what name and title are we to give the stranger, and what is his country? Such inquiries are the usual preliminaries to intercourse and acquaintance."

Epameinondas answered: "His name, Simmias, is Theanor; he is a native of Croton, one of philosophers of that region, and reflects no dishonour on the great fame of Pythagoras; indeed, he has come here at present on a long journey from Italy, confirming noble doctrines by noble works."

Here the stranger spoke: "Are not you, Epameinondas, preventing the noblest of those works? For if it is a noble act to benefit friends, it is no disgrace to be benefited by them; for the favour, requiring a recipient no less than a giver, needs both to be made perfect in nobility. He who refuses to accept the favour, like the man who refuses to catch a well-directed ball, disgraces it, allowing it to fall to the ground without achieving its end.⁶² For what target is so delightful to hit and so painful to miss, as a man deserving kindness at whom we aim a favour? Yet in the case of the target the man who misses has only himself to blame, as the mark is fixed; whereas with favours, the man who declines and moves aside is guilty of an offence against the favour, allowing it to fall short of its goal. To you I have already recounted the motives of my voyage hither; but I desire to recount them to these others as well and let them judge between us.

"After the Pythagorean societies throughout the different cities had been defeated by the revolutionaries and driven out, and after partisans of Cylon,⁶³ heaping fuel about the house where the society that still held together at Metapontum⁶⁴ was in session, and setting fire to it, had destroyed them all in the conflagration except Philolaüs and Lysis,⁶⁵ who were still young and forced a way through the flames by strength and agility, Philolaüs escaped to Lucania and from there reached in safety our remaining adherents, who had once more begun to assemble and prevail over Cylon's party, but for a long time no one knew what had become of Lysis; But last Gorgias of Leontini, on his return from Greece to Sicily,⁶⁶ brought definite word, and told Aresas⁶⁷ of meeting Lysis, who was living in Thebes. Aresas so felt his absence that he proposed with no more ado to make the voyage himself, but from age and infirmity proving quite unequal to the effort, he charged us to bring Lysis back to Italy alive if possible, or his remains if dead. The intervening wars, seditions and usurpations, however, kept his friends from carrying out the task for him during his lifetime. But when the daemon of Lysis — who had died in the interval — clearly revealed to us his death, and reports from men well acquainted with the circumstances told, Polymnis, Chow he had been cared for by your family and lived with you — that in the poverty of your household he had received rich provision for his age and departed in felicity, enrolled as father of your sons — I was sent, young and unaccompanied, by a company numerous and advanced in years, offering money, of which they have provision, to you who have none in return for great favour and friendship. Lysis has had from you a fitting burial, and better in his sight than a fitting burial is favour requited to friends by friends and fellows."⁶⁸

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15 1 Theanor rejoined: "Is it vulgar to feel disgust at poverty, and yet not absurd to dread and shun wealth?"

"It is absurd," replied Epameinondas, "if what moves a man to reject it is not reason, but a pose arising from coarseness or a kind of vanity."

"Indeed! And what reason, Epameinondas," he (Theanor) said, "would forbid its acquisition by noble and honest means? Or rather tell me this (for I beg you to show me a milder temper than you did the Thessalian in your answers on this point): do you think it sometimes proper to give money, but never to accept it, or do you think that under all circumstances givers are at fault as well as takers?"

"Not at all," said Epameinondas; "but in wealth as in other things I hold that the conferring and acceptance of a favour are sometimes shameful and sometimes honourable."

"Does not," Theanor went on, "the man who pays his debt willingly and cheerfully, do well in giving?"

Epameinondas agreed.

"And does not he who accepts a gift well given do well in receiving? Or how could money be more honestly accepted than by accepting it from one who gives it honestly?"

"In no other way," was the reply.

"Therefore, Epameinondas," he went on, "if of two friends the one ought to give, the other surely ought to accept; in battles one should elude the enemy who casts well, but in the matter of favours it is not right either to evade or to repulse the friend who gives well; for granting poverty no burden, no more is wealth in its turn so valueless and undesirable as all that."

"True," said Epameinondas; "yet there is a case where the rightly offered gift is more valuable and honourable if not accepted. Consider the point with me in the light of the following considerations.

"There are, I take it, many desires, and these have many objects. Some desires, called innate, spring up in the body with the necessary pleasures as objects. Others are adventitious,⁷⁵ and seek to gratify mere empty fancies. Yet when a man has had a poor upbringing, long habit makes them strong and violent, and often they drag the soul along and humble it more forcibly than do the necessary desires. Habit and practice, however, have been known to enable reason to abate much of even the innate passions; and one must apply the whole might of a strict course of training, my dear friend, to the intrusive and superfluous desires and wear them down and cut them off by letting reason chasten

them with repeated repression and restraint. For if thirst and hunger are overpowered by the resistance of reason to food and drink, it is surely far easier to check the appetites for wealth and fame and break their power in the end by abstaining from what they desire and holding them back. Do you not agree?"

The stranger assented.

"Do you observe," he asked, "a difference between a course of training and the goal such training serves; and as you would say that in athletics the goal is to compete with one's opponent for the crown, whereas the training is the preparation of the body for that end through exercise, so do you agree that in virtue as well the goal is one thing and the training another?"

When the stranger had agreed, Epameinondas continued: "First take the case of continence: do you regard abstention from shameful and unlawful pleasures as training or rather as the goal and evidence of training?"

"The goal and evidence," he replied.

"And do you not consider it as training and practice in continence to achieve it as you have all achieved it to this day? Exercising till your appetites, like so many animals, have been stirred up, you place yourself for some time before splendid tables and varied meats; then, relinquishing to your slaves enjoyment of the feast, you partake yourself of plain and simple fare with desires which by that time have been chastened.⁷⁶ For abstention from pleasure in what is allowed is a training of the soul to resist what is forbidden."

"Assuredly," he said.

"For justice too, my dear friend, a mode of training exists, whereby we resist the appetite for riches and money. It does not lie in abstention from going about at night to steal our neighbour's goods or strip men of their cloaks; nor yet does the man who refuses to betray country and friends for gold train himself to resist the passion for money (here, actually, it is perhaps the law and fear that keeps his cupidity from crime); it is instead the man who of his own free will repeatedly holds back from profits honourable and conceded by the law, that trains and accustoms himself to keep well aloof from all dishonest and unlawful gain.⁷⁷ For neither in the midst of great but unseemly and harmful pleasures can the mind remain unmoved, unless it has often, while free to enjoy it, held pleasure in contempt; nor yet is it easy to forgo sordid profits and lucrative but dishonest gains, when they come within our power, if a man's avarice, instead of being subdued well in advance and chastened, has been bred to

profit without stint where profit is legitimate, and so is all agog for fraud and crime, held back just barely and with difficulty from unrightful gain. He, on the other hand, who does not yield himself up to the favours of friends or the bounty of kings, but rejects even the windfalls of fortune, and on discovering hidden treasure, calls off the cupidity that leaps at it, finds that his cupidity does not rise in rebellion against him at the prospect of wrongdoing nor throw his thoughts into turmoil; instead, he readily disposes of himself for all good ends, holding his head high and conscious of the presence in his soul of nothing but the noblest thoughts. In our admiration for such men, dear Simmias, Caphisias and I entreat this grace of the stranger — to allow us practice enough in our poverty to achieve that excellence."

16 1 When my brother had done, Simmias nodded some two or three times in assent, and said: "Epameinondas is a great man, great indeed, and his greatness is due to Polymnis here, who from their early years provided his sons with the best upbringing, schooling them in philosophy. But this dispute, sir, you must settle with them yourself. To return to Lysis: if it is lawful for us to be told, are you going to remove him from his grave and take him to Italy, or will you permit him to remain here with us? He will find us good and friendly neighbours when we join him there."

Theanor smiled at this and said: "It would appear, Simmias, that Lysis is attached to his present abode, since, thanks to Epameinondas, he lacks no honourable provision. For a certain special rite⁷⁸ is performed at the burials of Pythagoreans, and without it we do not feel in full possession of the blessed end that is proper to our sect. And so, when we learned from our dreams of Lysis' death (we tell by a certain token appearing in our sleep whether the apparition is of the dead or of the living)⁷⁹ it occurred to many that Lysis had been improperly buried in a foreign land and that we must remove him so that over there⁸⁰ he might have the benefit of our customary rites. It was with this in mind that I came here; and as soon as the people of the country had led me to the grave (it was evening by then) I poured libations, summoning the soul of Lysis to return and reveal what course I should take. As the night advanced I saw no vision, but seemed to hear a voice that said 'touch not the inviolable,'⁸¹ as Lysis's friends had given his body consecrated burial, while his soul, already judged, had been joined by lot to another daemon⁸² and released for another birth. Moreover, on meeting Epameinondas this morning and hearing how he had buried Lysis, I recognized that he had been well instructed by that other,⁸³ even in the secrets, and that he had the same daemon for his life, if I have any skill to judge of the skipper by the navigation. For while the paths of life are numberless, yet those are few on which men are guided by daemons." On saying this Theanor looked at Epameinondas as though in renewed study of his character and appearance.

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Thereupon Phyllidas left to prepare his entertainment and lure Archias at once to his cups, and Charon to make the necessary preparations in his house for receiving the exiles. Theocritus and I returned to Simmias for an opportunity to confer with Epameinondas. Galaxidorus and Pheidolaüs had engaged in shortly before, when they raised the problem of the nature and mode of operation of the so-called sign of Socrates.⁸⁸ Simmias' reply to Galaxidorus' argument we did not hear; speaking for himself, however, he said that he had once asked Socrates about the matter without receiving an answer and had therefore never asked again; but he had often heard Socrates express the view that men who laid claim to visual communication with Heaven were impostors, while to such as affirmed that they had heard a voice he paid close attention and earnestly inquired after the particulars. "It thus occurred to us," Simmias went on to say, "as we examined the question in private among ourselves, to surmise that Socrates's sign was perhaps no vision, but rather the perception of a voice or else the mental apprehension of language that reached him in some strange way. So in sleep, where no sound is uttered, we fancy, as we receive the impression or notion of certain statements, that we hear people speaking.

"But whereas some men actually have this sort of apprehension in dreams, hearing better asleep, when the body is quiet and undisturbed, while when they are awake⁸⁹ their soul can hear the higher powers but faintly, and moreover, as they are overwhelmed by the tumult of their passions and the distractions of their wants, they cannot listen or attend to the message; Socrates, on the other hand, had an understanding which, being pure and free from passion, and commingling with the body but little, for necessary ends, was so sensitive and delicate as to respond at once to what reached him. What reached him, one would conjecture, was not spoken language, but the unuttered words of a daemon, making voiceless contact with his intelligence by their sense alone.⁹⁰ For speech is like a blow⁹¹ — when we converse with one another, the words are forced through our ears and the soul is compelled to take them in —; whereas the intelligence of the higher power guides the gifted soul, which requires no blows, by the touch of its thought; and the soul on its part yields to the slackening and tightening of its movements by the higher intelligence. No constraint is exerted, as no passion pulls the other way, and the movements of the soul respond easily and gently, like reins that give. This should occasion no surprise, when we observe that large merchantmen are brought round by small tillers, and that potters' wheels whirl about evenly at the touch of the fingertip; for these, though inanimate, nevertheless, being constructed to revolve easily, move so smoothly that they respond to the mover at the slightest pressure. But the soul of man, which is strung with countless inward movements, as with resilient cords,⁹² is, when rationally dealt with, by far the most sensitive of all instruments,⁹³ moving at a slight impulse toward the goal conceived by the understanding. For here it is in the understanding, to which they are made fast and taut, that the passions and inward

movements have their origins; and when that is struck, these are pulled and thereby exercise traction on the man and give him tension. Indeed, it is most of all by this that we are enabled to comprehend the great power of an idea. For insensate bones and thews and flesh saturated with humours, and the inert and prostrate mass they constitute, the instant the soul conceives a purpose in the understanding and sets its movement going for that end, arise as a whole, tense and co-ordinate in all its parts, and fly as if winged to carry the idea to execution.⁹⁴

"Moreover, it is no hard or hopeless task to understand by what manner of impact, co-ordination, and suggestion the soul receives a thought and thereby with its movements draws after it the corporeal mass.⁹⁵ But if the body is moved with so little trouble by a notion that enters the understanding without the help of spoken language, it cannot be hard, I think, to believe that the understanding may be guided by a higher understanding and a diviner soul, that lays hold of it from without by a touch, which is the way in which it is the nature of thought to impinge on thought,⁹⁶ just as light produces a reflection. For in very truth our recognition of one another's thoughts through the medium of the spoken word is like groping in the dark; whereas the thoughts of daemons are luminous and shed their light on the daemonic man. Their thoughts have no need of verbs or nouns, which men use as symbols in their intercourse, and thereby behold mere counterfeits and likenesses of what is present in thought, but are unaware of the originals except for those persons who are illuminated, as I have said, by some special and daemonic radiance. Even so the phenomenon of speech serves in a way to allay the doubts of the incredulous. For on receiving the impression of articulate sounds, the air is fully changed to language and speech and conveys the thought to the soul of the hearer. Need we then feel surprised that the air, with its ready susceptibility, should also be transformed by the mere ideas of higher beings and thereby indicate to divine and exceptional men the meaning of him who conceived the idea? For just as the sound of sappers' blows is detected by bronze shields,⁹⁷ which re-echo it as it rises from the depths of the earth and strikes them, whereas through everything else it slips unnoticed; so the messages of daemons pass through all other men, but find an echo in those only whose character is untroubled and soul unruffled, the very men in fact we call holy and daemonic. In popular belief, on the other hand, it is only in sleep that men receive inspiration from on high; and the notion that they are so influenced when awake and in full possession of their faculties is accounted strange and incredible. This is like supposing that a musician uses his lyre when the strings are slack, but does not touch or play it when it has been adjusted to a scale and attuned. This belief arises from ignorance of the cause of this insensibility: the inner lack of attunement and the confusion in the men themselves. From this my friend Socrates was free, as is shown by the oracle delivered to his father when Socrates was yet a boy. It bade him let the child do whatever came into his mind, and not do violence to his impulses or divert them, but allow them free play, taking no further trouble about him

than to pray to Zeus Agoraeus⁹⁸ and the Muses, surely implying by this that he had a better guide of life in himself than a thousand teachers and attendants.

21 1 "Such was the notion, Pheidolaüs, that we for our part held about Socrates' sign while he was alive and still hold now he is dead; we have scant use for those who account for it by chance remarks overheard or sneezes or the like. The story I had about it from Timarchus of Chaeroneia, as it more resembles a myth or fiction than an argument,⁹⁹ I had perhaps better leave untold."

"Do no such thing," said Theocritus, "but let us have it; for myths, too, despite the loose manner in which they do so, have a way of reaching the truth. But first tell us who this Timarchus was, as I do not recognize the name."

"And little wonder, Theocritus," said Simmias, "for he died very young, after asking Socrates' leave to be buried beside Lamprocles,¹⁰⁰ Socrates' son, his friend and age fellow, who had died a few days before. Timarchus, then, in his desire to learn the nature of Socrates' sign, acted like the high-spirited young initiate in philosophy he was: consulting no one but Cebes and me, he descended into the crypt of Trophonius, first performing the rites that are customary at the oracle.¹⁰¹ He remained underground two nights and a day, and most people had already given up hope, and his family were lamenting him for dead, when he came up in the morning with a radiant countenance.¹⁰² He did obeisance to the god, and as soon as he had escaped the crowd, began to tell us of many wonders seen and heard.

22 1 "He said that on descending into the oracular crypt his first experience was of profound darkness; next, after a prayer, he lay a long time not clearly aware whether he was awake or dreaming. It did seem to him, however, that at the same moment he heard a crash and was struck on the head, and that the sutures parted and released his soul. As it withdrew and mingled joyfully with air that was translucent and pure, it felt in the first place that now, after long being cramped, it had again found relief, and was growing larger than before, spreading out like a sail; and next that it faintly caught the whir of something revolving overhead with a pleasant sound.¹⁰³ When he lifted his eyes the earth was nowhere to be seen; but he saw islands illuminated by one another with soft fire, taking on now one colour, now another, like a dye, as the light kept varying with their mutations. They appeared countless in number and huge in size, and though not all equal, yet all alike round; and he fancied that their circular movement made a musical whirling in the aether, for the gentleness of the sound resulting from the harmony of all the separate sounds corresponded to the evenness of their motion. In their midst lay spread a sea or lake,¹⁰⁴ through whose blue transparency the colours passed in their migrations; and of the islands a few sailed out in a channel and crossed the current,¹⁰⁵ while many others¹⁰⁶ were carried along with it, the sea itself drifting around, as it were, smoothly and evenly in a circle. In places it was very deep, mainly toward the south, but elsewhere there were faint shoals and

shallows;¹⁰⁷ and in many parts it overflowed and again receded, never extending very far.¹⁰⁸ Some of it was of the pure hue of the high seas, while elsewhere the colour was not unmixed, but turbid and like that of a pool.¹⁰⁹ As they crested the surge¹¹⁰ the islands¹¹¹ came back, without, however, returning to their point of departure or completing a circle; but with each new circuit they advanced slightly beyond the old, describing a single spiral in their revolution.¹¹² The sea containing these was inclined at an angle of somewhat less than eight parts of the whole¹¹³ toward the midmost and largest portion of the surrounding envelope,¹¹⁴ as he made out; and it had two openings receiving rivers of fire emptying into it across from one another, so that it was forced far back, boiling, and its blue colour was turned to white.¹¹⁵ All this he viewed with enjoyment of the spectacle. But looking down he saw a great abyss, round, as though a sphere had been cut away; most terrible and deep it was, and filled with a mass of darkness that did not remain at rest, but was agitated¹¹⁶ and often welled up. From it could be heard innumerable roars and groans of animals, the wailing of innumerable babes, the mingled lamentations of men and women, and noise and uproar of every kind, coming faintly from far down in the depths, all of which startled him not a little.¹¹⁷

"After an interval someone he did not see addressed him: 'Timarchus what would you have me explain?'

" 'Everything,' he answered; 'for what is here that is not marvellous?'

" 'Nay,' the voice replied, 'in the higher regions we others¹¹⁸ have but little part, as they belong to gods; but you may, if you wish, inquire into the portion of Persephonê, administered by ourselves; it is one of the four,¹¹⁹ and marked off by the course of the Styx.'

" 'What is the Styx?' he asked. 'It is the path to Hades,' came the answer; 'it passes across from you here, cleaving the light with its vertex; it extends upward, as you see, from Hades below, and where in its revolution it also touches the world of light, it bounds the last region of all.¹²⁰ Four principles there are of all things: the first is of life, the second of motion, the third of birth, and the last of decay; the first is linked to the second by Unity at the invisible,¹²¹ the second to the third by Mind at the sun, and the third to the fourth by Nature at the moon.¹²² A Fate, daughter of Necessity, holds the keys and presides over each link: over the first Atropos, over the second Clotho, and over the link at the moon Lachesis. The turning point of birth¹²³ is at the moon. For while the rest of the islands belong to the gods, the moon belongs to terrestrial daemons and avoids the Styx by passing slightly above it; it is caught, however, once in a hundred and seventy-seven secondary measures.¹²⁴ As the Styx draws near the souls cry out¹²⁵ in terror, for many slip off¹²⁶ and are carried away by Hades; others, whose cessation of birth¹²⁷ falls out at the proper moment, swim up from below¹²⁸ and are rescued by the Moon, the foul and unclean excepted.¹²⁹ These the Moon, with lightning and a terrible roar, forbids to

approach, and bewailing their lot they fall away and are borne downward again to another birth, as you see.¹³⁰

" 'But I see nothing,' said Timarchus; 'only many stars trembling about the abyss, others sinking into it, and others again shooting up from below.'

" 'Then without knowing it,' the being replied, 'you see the daemons themselves. I will explain: every soul partakes of understanding; none is irrational or unintelligent. But the portion of the soul that mingles with flesh and passions suffers alteration and becomes in the pleasures and pains it undergoes irrational.¹³¹ Not every soul mingles to the same extent: some sink entirely into the body, and becoming disordered throughout, are during their life wholly distracted by passions; others mingle in part, but leave outside what is purest in them. This is not dragged in with the rest, but is like a buoy attached to the top, floating on the surface in contact with the man's head, while he is as it were submerged in the depths; and it supports as much of the soul, which is held upright about it, as is obedient and not overpowered by the passions. Now the part carried submerged¹³² in the body is called the soul, whereas the part left free from corruption is called by the multitude the understanding, who take it to be within themselves, as they take reflected objects to be in the mirrors that reflect them; but those who conceive the matter rightly call it a daemon,¹³³ as being external. Thus, Timarchus,' the voice pursued, 'in the stars that are apparently extinguished, you must understand that you see the souls that sink entirely into the body; in the stars that are lighted again, as it were, and reappear from below, you must understand that you see the souls that float back from the body after death, shaking off a sort of dimness and darkness as one might shake off mud; while the stars that move about on high are the daemons of men said to "possess understanding."¹³⁴ See whether you can make out in each the manner of its linkage and union with the soul.'

"Hearing this, he attended more carefully and saw that the stars bobbed about, some more, some less, like the corks we observe riding on the sea to mark nets; a few described a confused and uneven spiral, like spindles as they twist the thread, and were unable to reduce their movement to a straight and steady course. The voice explained that the daemons whose motion was straight and ordered had souls which good nurture and training had made submissive to the rein,¹³⁵ and whose irrational part was not unduly hard-mouthed and restive; whereas those which were constantly deviating in all directions from a straight course in an uneven and confused motion, as though jerked about on a tether, were contending with a character refractory and unruly from lack of training, at one moment prevailing over it and wheeling to the right, at another yielding to their passions and dragged along by their errors, only to resist them later and oppose them with force. For, exerting a contrary pull on the tie, which is like a bridle inserted into the irrational part of the soul, the daemon applies what is called

remorse to the errors, and shame for all lawless and willful pleasures — remorse and shame being really the painful blow inflicted from this source upon the soul as it is curbed by its controlling and ruling part — until from such chastening the soul, like a docile animal, becomes obedient and accustomed to the reins, needing no painful blows, but rendered keenly responsive to its daemon by signals and signs. 'These souls indeed,' the voice pursued, 'are brought to their duty and made firm in it late and gradually; but from those other souls, which from their very beginning and birth are docile to the rein and obedient to their daemon,¹³⁶ comes the race of diviners and of men inspired. Among such souls you have doubtless heard of that of Hermodorus¹³⁷ of Clazomenae — how night and day it used to leave his body entirely and travel far and wide, returning after it had met with and witnessed many things said and done in remote places, until his wife betrayed him and his enemies found his body at home untenanted by his soul and burnt it. The story as thus told is indeed not true: his soul did not leave his body, but gave its daemon free play by always yielding to it and slackening the tie, permitting it to move about and roam at will, so that the daemon could see and hear much that passed in the world outside and return with the report. The men who destroyed his body as he slept are still atoning for the deed in Tartarus. Of these matters,' the voice said, 'you will have better knowledge, young man, in the third month from now; for the present, depart.'

"When the voice ceased Timarchus desired to turn (he said) and see who the speaker was. But once more he felt a sharp pain in his head, as though it had been violently compressed, and he lost all recognition and awareness of what was going on about him; but he presently recovered and saw that he was lying in the crypt of Trophonius near the entrance, at the very spot where he had first laid himself down.

23 1 "Such then is the myth of Timarchus. When he had come to Athens and died in the third month, as the voice had foretold,¹³⁸ we were amazed and told Socrates the story, who censured us for recounting it when Timarchus was no longer alive, as he would have been glad to hear it from Timarchus himself and question him about it more closely.

"My statement is now complete, Theocritus, and you have the myth along with the argument. But consider whether we should not also invite the stranger to join in the inquiry, for it is one most fitting and appropriate to inspired men."

"Why does not Epameinondas make his contribution?" asked the stranger. "He draws upon the same doctrines as I."

"That is his way, sir," said my father with a smile: "to be silent and chary of speech, but insatiable of learning and listening. On this account Spintharus¹³⁹ of Tarentum, who was long associated with him

here, keeps saying, as you know, that nowhere in his generation has he met a man of greater knowledge and fewer words. You must accordingly present your views about what has been said yourself."

24 1 "I say, therefore," he said, "that the story of Timarchus, as sacred and not to be profaned, should be dedicated to the god.¹⁴⁰ As for Simmias' own statement, I should be surprised if any should find it hard to accept, and when they call swans, serpents, dogs, and horses sacred, refuse to believe that men are divine and dear to God, and that too holding him no lover of birds, but of men.¹⁴¹ As, then, a man that loves horses does not devote the same care to all members of the species, but always singles out and sets apart some one horse that is best, training and rearing it by itself and cherishing it above the rest, so too our betters take the best of us, as from a herd, and setting a mark on us, honour us with a peculiar and exceptional schooling, guiding us not by rein or bridle, but by language expressed in symbols quite unknown to the generality and common herd of men. So too it is not the generality of hounds that understand the hunter's signals, or of horses the horseman's; it is only such as have been taught that readily take their orders from a mere casual whistle or clucking of the tongue and do what is required. Homer too, it is evident, knew the distinction¹⁴² of which we others speak, as he calls some diviners 'consulters of birds'¹⁴³ and 'priests',¹⁴⁴ but thinks that others indicate the future from an understanding and awareness of the actual conversation of the gods. These are his words:

That counsel Helenus in his heart perceived,
The son of Priam, which the gods had reached
In their deliberation¹⁴⁵

and

Such speech of the immortal gods I heard.¹⁴⁶

For as outsiders perceive and recognize the intention of kings and generals from beacons and the proclamations of heralds and the blare of trumpets, whereas to confidants and intimates it is imparted by the kings and generals themselves, so heaven consorts directly with but few, and rarely, but to the great majority gives signs, from which arises the art called divination. The gods, then, order the life of but few among men, such as they wish to make supremely blessed and in very truth divine; whereas souls delivered from birth and henceforth at rest from the body — set quite free, as it were, to range at will — are, as Hesiod¹⁴⁷ says, daemons that watch over man. For as athletes who from old age have given up training do not entirely lose their ardour and their love of bodily prowess, but look on with pleasure as others train, and call out encouragement and run along beside them, so those who are

done with the contests of life, and who, from prowess of soul, have become daemons, do not hold what is done and said and striven after in this world in utter contempt, but are propitious to contenders for the same goal, join in their ardour, and encourage and help them to the attainment of virtue than they see them keeping up the struggle and all but reaching their heart's desire. For daemons do not assist all indifferently, but as when men swim a sea, those standing on the shore merely view in silence the swimmers who are still far out distant from land, whereas they help with hand and voice alike such as have come near, and running along and wading in beside them bring them safely in, such too, my friends, is the way of daemons: as long as we are head over ears in the welter of worldly affairs and are changing body after body, like conveyances, they allow us to fight our way out and persevere unaided, as we endeavour by our own prowess to come through safe and reach a haven; but when in the course of countless births a soul has stoutly and resolutely sustained a long series of struggles, and as her cycle draws to a close, she approaches the upper world, bathed in sweat, in imminent peril and straining every nerve to reach the shore,¹⁴⁸ God holds it no sin for her daemon to go to the rescue, but lets whoever will lend aid. One p485daemon is eager to deliver by his exhortations one soul, another another, and the soul on her part, having drawn close, can hear, and is thus saved; but if she pays no heed, she is forsaken by her daemon and comes to no happy end."

The Editor's Notes:

¹ A desperate and much-emended sentence. The meaning is uncertain.

⁴⁵ Daimonion, here rendered "sign" or "sign from Heaven," is literally "the divine thing" or (pressing the etymology) "the daemonic thing."

⁴⁶ *Od.* XIII.301 (*cf. Il.* X.279); *cf.* also Apuleius, *De Deo Socratis*, 165 ff.

⁴⁷ Homer, *Il.* XX.95; *cf. Od.* XIX.34.

⁴⁸ Otherwise unknown; perhaps it was a city square — D-shaped to judge by its name: *cf. W. Judeich, Topographie von Athen*², p178.

⁴⁹ *Cf. W. Judeich, ibid.* p353; [Life of Alcibiades, chap. xxi.2 \(201F\)](#).

⁵⁰ Otherwise unknown.

⁵¹ Plutarch's statics may be at fault. If so, he inferred the physical process from the mental: *cf. Mor.* 1045B-C.

⁵² *Cf. Life of Nicias, chap. xiii.9 (532B); Life of Alcibiades, chap. xvii.5 (199F); [Plato], Theages, 129C-D.*

⁵³ Pylilampes was Plato's stepfather.

⁵⁴ "At Oropus" translates a conjecture. Thucydides ([IV.96.7](#)) mentions three routes taken by the defeated Athenians: to Delion and the sea, to Oropus, and toward Parnes. The corruption in the Greek text doubtless

⁵⁵ *Cf. Plato, Symposium, 221A, and Laches, 181E.*

⁵⁶ The story is also found in [Cicero, De Div. I.54 \(123\)](#), and Pseudo-Socrates, *Ep.* 1.9.

⁵⁷ From the *Autolycus*: Nauck, *Trag. Graec. Frag.*, Eur. 282.22; quoted also in [Mor. 803B](#).

⁵⁸ *Cf. Mor. 410D.*

⁵⁹ For a comparison of divination to reading *cf. Plotinus, Enn.* III.1.6.

⁶⁰ *Cf. the words of Polymnis, 581B, supra.*

⁶¹ Perhaps one of the seven boeotarchs who commanded at Leuctra: *cf. Pausanias, IX.13.7.*

⁶² For the comparison of the ball *cf. Chrysippus*, quoted in Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, II.17.3, and Plutarch, *Comm. in Hesiodum*, 32 (vol. VII, p68.11-16 Bern.).

⁶³ The head of the anti-Pythagorean faction.

⁶⁴ Most ancient authorities agree that Pythagoras died at Metapontum, but put the conflagration at Croton: *cf. Diogenes Laert. VIII.39 f.* with the passages adduced by A. Delatte (*La Vie de Pythagore de Diogène Laërce*, Brussels, 1922, pp136 f.).

⁶⁵ Archippus is usually mentioned as escaping with Lysis: *cf. Zeller, Die Philos. d. Griechen*, I.16, p419, note. Olympiodorus (*In Plat. Phaedon. Comm.* p9.16-20 Norvin) says that Lysis and Hipparchus were the two that escaped, and that Philolaüs went to Thebes to offer libations at the grave of Lysis, his teacher.

⁶⁶ Perhaps on the return from his embassy to Athens in 427.

⁶⁷ The head of the Pythagorean societies: *cf. Iamblichus, De Vita Pythagorica, 266F.*

⁶⁸ Theanor's style is as elaborate as his dress.

⁷⁵ *Cf. Mor. 989B-C and Aristoxenus*, quoted by Stobaeus, vol. III, p424.15-18 (ed. Hense).

⁷⁶ For this practice of the Pythagoreans *cf. Diodorus, X.5.2*, and Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica*, chap. xxi. 187.

⁷⁷ Cf. [Mor. 522B](#).

⁷⁸ The rite is unknown. For the funeral observances of the Pythagoreans cf. F. Cumont, "A propos des dernières paroles de Socrate" in *Comptes-Rendus, Ac. des Inscr. et Belles-Lettres* (1943), pp114 f.

⁷⁹ G. Méautis, *Recherches sur le pythagorisme* (Neuchâtel, 1922), pp34 f., compares *Mor.* 564D and 300C to show that if the apparition blinked its eyes or cast a shadow it was taken to belong to a living person.

⁸⁰ Probably "in Italy"; but possibly the meaning is "in the other world."

⁸¹ Literally "not to move (or disturb) what may not be moved (or disturbed)."

⁸² For theories about the daemon of the Pythagoreans cf. P. C. van der Horst, *Les Vers d'or pythagoriciens*(Leyden, 1932), pp49-53.

⁸³ Literally "that man," an expression of respect among the Pythagoreans. Cf. P. Shorey in *Classical Philology*, XII (1917), p436.

⁸⁸ Cf. K. Reinhardt, *Poseidonios*, pp464 ff.

⁸⁹ Cf. [Cicero, De Div. I.49 \(110\)](#): "Sed vigilantes animi vitae necessitatibus serviunt diiunguntque se a societate divina vinclis corporis inpediti"; *ibid.* I.53 f. (121 f.) and [57 \(129 f.\)](#).

⁹⁰ Cf. Chalcidius, chap. cclv, p288 (ed. Wrobel): "Now the voice that Socrates heard was not, I think, of the sort that is made when air is struck; rather it revealed to his soul, which was, by reason of his great purity, unpolluted and therefore more perceptive, the presence and society of his familiar deity, since only the pure may meet and mingle with the pure. And as in dreams we fancy that we hear voices and words of spoken language, and yet here there is no voice, but only meaning, doing duty of voice; so the mind of Socrates, by the token of a vivid sign, could divine in waking moments the presence of the deity."

⁹¹ For definitions and descriptions of "speech" or "voice" (phonê) as a "blow on the air" cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 67B, and Aristotle, *De Anima*, II.8 (420 B29).

⁹² Hyspleges (rendered "resilient cords") are probably here the twisted cords that supplied the motive power in certain ancient automata (cf. Hero, *Automata*, II.8).

⁹³ Cf. [Mor. 163E](#).

⁹⁴ Cf. [Mor. 442C-E](#).

⁹⁵ Cf. [Life of Coriolanus, chap. xxxii.7-8 \(229D-E\)](#).

⁹⁶ "Thought" (logos) can mean notion or the rational soul.

⁹⁷ Cf. [Herodotus, IV.200.2-3](#); Aeneas Tacticus, chap. xxxvii.6-7.

⁹⁸ That is, "Zeus of the Market-Place"; cf. *Mor.* [789D](#), [792F](#). For Socrates' conversations in the market-place cf. Plato, *Apology*, 17C.

⁹⁹ For the contrast of "myth" and "argument" cf. *Mor.* 561B and note.

¹⁰⁰ Lamprocles, the eldest of Socrates' children, was presumably alive at the time of his father's death (cf. Zeller, *Die Phil. der Griechen*, II.14, pp54, note 2 and 56, note). This unhistorical detail may have been added to warn the reader that Timarchus, like his story, is a fable.

¹⁰¹ Those who wished to consult the oracle of Trophonius, at Lebadeia in Boeotia, descended into a cave and waited there for the divine message to be revealed in a dream: cf. [Pausanias, IX.39.5-14](#).

¹⁰² And so belying the proverb εἰς Τροφωνίου μεμάντευται "he has consulted Trophonius' oracle," used of persons with a gloomy countenance (cf. Leutsch and Schneidewin, *Paroem. Gr.* I, p72.1 and note).

¹⁰³ This is the music of the spheres. Aristotle (*De Caelo*, II.9) argues that the sound would be excruciatingly loud. For a smooth motion producing a smooth sound cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 67B.

¹⁰⁴ The sea and its circular movement represent the celestial sphere and its apparent diurnal motion. Von Arnim, "Plut. über Dämonen u. Mantik," in *Verh. d. kon. Ak. v. Wet.*, Afd. Lett. Nieuwe Reeks, Deel XXII, Amsterdam, 1921, p34, takes the sea to represent the Milky Way.

¹⁰⁵ The current is the celestial equator (the part of the celestial sphere which has the most rapid apparent motion); the islands that cross it are the planets; the channel is the zodiac.

¹⁰⁶ The fixed stars.

¹⁰⁷ The shoals and shallows may represent nebulae and the Milky Way. The great deep in the dinner was suggested by the starless space around the invisible pole in Greek globes.

¹⁰⁸ The overflow and recession may represent the various distances separating the stars from the surface of the sphere: cf. Aëtius, II.15.1-2, and Geminus, chap. i.23 with Manitius' note. Or they may have been suggested by the Pythagorean theory of the breathing universe (cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, IV.6, 213 B22-24). Von Arnim (*op. cit.* pp34 f.) takes them to represent the variations in breadth of the Milky Way.

¹⁰⁹ The clouded colour belongs to the region below the moon.

¹¹⁰ The "surge" may be the belt bounded by the tropics, so called from its rapid motion, or the tropics themselves, as being the shores of the planetary sea mentioned in the following sentence.

¹¹¹ The planets.

¹¹² The spiral (for which cf. [Life of Phocion, chap. ii.6, 742D](#), and Plato, *Timaeus*, 39A) represents the apparent paths of the planets, which result from their own motion combined with the apparent diurnal motion of the sphere.

¹¹³ The sea is the zodiac. "Eight parts" of the whole are eight sixtieths of a meridian (for the division into sixtieths cf. [Strabo, II.5.7, pp113 f.](#); Manilius, I.561-593; Geminus, chap. v.46; Achilles, *Isag.* chap. xxvi; and Hyginus, *Astron.* I.6). This is 48°, only slightly in excess of the figures given by the astronomers for the distance between the tropics (cf. Sir T. L. Heath, *Aristarchus of Samos*, p131, note 4).

¹¹⁴ The celestial equator, which "surrounds" the ecliptic; cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 36C, with Cornford's discussion. A certain mystery (appropriate in a myth) results from counting *both* the arcs intercepted

by the ecliptic and the equator on the solstitial colure in reckoning the inclination. The words "as he made out" hint that the error is Timarchus' own. We have found no ancient measure corresponding to 3°.

[115](#) The reference is doubtless to the Milky Way; the openings are at the intersections of the zodiac and the galactic circle.

[116](#) F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains* (Paris, 1942), p136, note 3, points out that *atektarattomenou* ("agitated") contains a common etymology of Tartaros. In [Mor. 940F](#) it is said that if an inhabitant of the moon should hear Homer's description of Hades and Tartarus (*Il.* XX.65, VIII.16) he would take them to be in the region of the earth. Cf. also [Mor. 948E](#).

[117](#) The abyss is Hades or the earth (*cf.* [591A](#), *infra*), which is a place of punishment and opposed to the world of eternal light. Cumont (*op. cit.* p56) takes the "sphère coupée" to be the lower hemisphere of the universe.

[118](#) The speaker is presumably a daemon: *cf.* [591C](#), *infra*.

[119](#) The first lies outside the surface of the celestial sphere; the second between that and path of the sun; the third between the paths of the sun and of the moon; and the fourth, "the portion of Persephonê," below the path of the moon, that is, of the earth's shadow, which is dissipated beyond the moon. The earth is "Hades" (*cf.* [Mor. 942F](#); the etymology is "unseen"), and its shadow is the "Styx."

[120](#) Cf. Stobaeus, vol. I, pp198.10-12, 448.12-16 Wachsmuth.

[121](#) The surface of the celestial sphere.

[122](#) In [Mor. 943A](#) earth provides man's body, the moon his soul, and the sun his intellect.

[123](#) Cf. *Mor.* [568E](#), 745B, [945C](#). The ultimate source is Plato, *Phaedo*, 72B.

[124](#) A primary measure is a "day" in Geminus' first sense (chap. vi.1, p68.13 f. Manitius), the time from sunrise to sunset; a secondary measure is "day" in Geminus' second sense (chap. vi.1, p68.15 f. Manitius), the tie between two successive risings of the sun (*cf.* also Priscianus Lydus, *Solut. ad Chosroem*, p65.22-26 Bywater). One hundred and seventy-seven days of this latter kind make six lunar months. For lunar eclipses at intervals of six lunar months *cf.* *Mor.* [933D-E](#), [942E-F](#) and R. Flacelière in *Revue des Études Anciennes*, vol. LIII (1951), pp203-221.

[125](#) Cf. [Mor. 944B](#).

[126](#) Cf. [Mor. 943D](#).

[127](#) The "cessation of birth" is the release from the cycle of birth and death.

[128](#) Cf. [Mor. 944B](#).

[129](#) Cf. [Mor. 942F](#).

[130](#) Cf. [Mor. 943D](#).

¹³¹ Cf. [Mor. 943A](#).

¹³² For "submerged" cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248A.

¹³³ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 90A.

¹³⁴ The common expression noun *echein*, meaning "to be sensible," is here taken in its literal sense, "to possess understanding." All souls, strictly speaking, possess understanding, but the daemon is explaining a popular expression (cf. [591E](#), [supra](#)).

¹³⁵ Cf. [Mor. 943D](#) and [445B-D](#).

¹³⁶ Cf. [Mor. 445B](#).

¹³⁷ The story is elsewhere told of Hermodotimus of Clazomenae: cf. J. H. Waszink's note on Tertullian, *De Anima*, chap. xlv (Amsterdam, 1947), pp475 f.

¹³⁸ The visionary often hears a prediction of his own death: cf. [Mor. 566D](#) and note.

¹³⁹ Cf. [Mor. 39B](#).

¹⁴⁰ G. M. Lattanzi, *Il "De genio Socratis" di Plutarco*, p64, note 2, quotes [Pausanias, IX.39.14](#): "Those who have made the descent into the cave of Trophonius must write what they have seen or heard on a tablet and set it up as a dedication."

¹⁴¹ Cf. [Life of Numa, chap. iv.4 \(62A-B\)](#), and [Plato], *Minos*, 319A.

¹⁴² That is, the Stoic distinction between "artificial" divination, which interprets omens, and so-called "artless" or "untaught" divination, which is found in dreams and inspiration. Cf. Pseudo-Plutarch, *De Vita et Poesi Homeri*, II.212, and [Cicero, De Div. I.6 \(11\)](#) with Pease's note.

¹⁴³ Cf. *Il.* I.69, VI.76.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. *Il.* I.62, XXIV.221.

¹⁴⁵ *Il.* VII.44 f.

¹⁴⁶ *Il.* VII.53.

¹⁴⁷ *Works and Days*, 122 ff; quoted also in [Mor. 361B](#), [431E](#).

¹⁴⁸ The word *ekbasis*, translated "shore," but literally "egress," was suggested by Homer, *Od.* V.410.

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